The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President: Under rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Robert Serry, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestine Authority.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I now give the floor to Mr. Serry.

Mr. Serry: The situation between the Palestinians and Israel remains uncertain and difficult. The events of the past month demonstrate a dangerous combination of no political progress, instability and violence on the ground, especially in Gaza, and an increasingly precarious situation for the Palestinian Authority (PA).

The Quartet principals met for consultations on 12 March here in New York to assess developments and to reiterate their commitment to the objectives of their 23 September statement (SG/2178). They welcomed the important effort led by Jordan to facilitate the resumption of direct talks between Israelis and Palestinians with a view to shaping the path to a negotiated agreement before the end of the year. I met fellow Quartet envoys in Brussels on 21 March to prepare for the upcoming meeting of the Quartet principals, now scheduled for 11 April in Washington, D.C.

The unfortunate reality is that the parties have not yet found sufficient common ground to resume direct negotiations, and the prospects remain slim. The Jordanian track has been valuable, and we continue to encourage exploratory talks under Jordanian auspices to identify ways to move the process forward. We also continue to urge both sides to avoid any provocations that would be detrimental to the prospects for peace.

In parallel, we must continue to make progress on the ground for the Palestinians. The very viability of the Palestinian Authority is at stake, and ensuring its sustainability remains a fundamental priority. The meeting of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee for the Coordination of International Assistance to Palestinians (AHLC) on 21 March in Brussels reconfirmed the institutional readiness of the Palestinian Authority to assume the functions required of a future State.

However, the primary concern of all AHLC members was the dire financial situation of the Palestinian Authority. We regret that technical agreements to strengthen revenue collection by Israel on behalf of the PA, which provides approximately 70 per cent of the net PA revenue, and to minimize revenue leakage during transfer have not been finalized. The AHLC members called on donors to meet the $1 billion-financing requirement of the Palestinian Authority for 2012. I therefore reiterate the call on donors to meet their commitments and front-load contributions. Israel must also play its full role to help alleviate the fiscal situation of the PA.

I must underscore that Palestinian State-building efforts face increased risks. Little progress was achieved in the past several months, while financial and political pressure on the Palestinian Authority increased. The prolonged absence of a credible political horizon is beginning to undermine the viability of the Palestinian State-building effort. In support of the PA, the AHLC identified a range of immediate measures to be taken on the ground. The AHLC called on Israel to take further steps to improve the movement of people and goods, trade and exports in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as development in Area C and East Jerusalem.

Area C remains critical to the viability of a future Palestinian State. In the coming months, we must ensure a broadening of community-driven planning in Area C and the provision of basic services, including with regard to education and health. Recent progress in obtaining permits for key infrastructure in Area C is welcome. The United Nations is already engaged on those issues, at both the policy and programming levels. Moreover, due consideration should be given to the transfer of land to the Palestinian Authority in Area C, in particular in areas surrounding major urban centres, so as to facilitate more suitable urban development and relieve the acute pressure on the land and housing market.

In the absence of progress, there have been a number of potentially worrying developments in the West Bank and Gaza. In the West Bank, a comparison between January and February revealed that, while the

Israel Defense Forces (IDF) search operations in areas under the full control of the Palestinian Authority remained at the same level, the number of Palestinians injured during those operations more than tripled, from 46 to 138. Stone-throwing incidents by Palestinians increased significantly, along with the use of Molotov cocktails. Demonstrations and riots in the West Bank almost doubled. Most demonstrations protested Israeli actions, but some protested the Palestinian Authority's perceived failure to achieve reconciliation with Hamas.

Of the more than 100 Palestinians who were injured by the IDF during the reporting period, at least 90 were injured during demonstrations that resulted in clashes with the IDF. That included one Palestinian man critically injured on 5 March at a checkpoint near Ramallah when a tear gas canister hit his head directly. Large demonstrations are expected during the commemoration of the events of 30 March 1976 — referred to as Land Day by Palestinians — which will be held in various countries of the region on 30 March. In Lebanon, where Palestinian factions are also planning to participate in commemorative events, Lebanese authorities have declared that they are taking measures to avoid violence and the occurrence of incidents close to the Blue Line. The United Nations is monitoring the situation. Allow me to stress that the right of peaceful protest must be upheld and that protests must be kept strictly non-violent.

Citing security, the IDF conducted 273 operations into the West Bank. Early this morning, three Palestinians and one Israeli soldier were wounded during an Israeli incursion near Ramallah. On 8 March, a young Palestinian was shot dead, and two were injured, by Israeli security forces during a raid near Hebron, after a Palestinian stabbed and slightly injured an Israeli soldier. On 15 March, a 19-year-old female Israeli soldier was stabbed and moderately injured while riding the Jerusalem light rail near the settlement of Pisgat Ze'ev; one Palestinian suspect was apprehended. On 6 March, two Palestinian children were killed, and three more were injured, when a piece of unexploded military ordnance detonated near the West Bank city of Hebron.

On 29 February, the Israeli Ministry of Communications and security forces confiscated broadcasting equipment from two Palestinian television stations in Area A of Ramallah after an unresolved dispute on the use of radio frequencies. Both channels have broadcast since 1996 and are registered with the International Telecommunication Union. They have partially resumed transmission through support from other Palestinian channels.

The situation of the approximately 4,400 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli detention centres, 300 of whom are under administrative detention, remains an important focus of attention, in particular as some detainees have continued to protest their situation through hunger strikes. A high-profile case is that of Hana Shalabi, a female Palestinian prisoner affiliated with Islamic Jihad who started her hunger strike on 16 February in protest of alleged ill-treatment under administrative detention. Her condition has now reached a life-threatening stage. Meanwhile, on 25 March, an Israeli court rejected her appeal. I call for a reasonable resolution to this case on the basis of our reiterated view that the use of administrative detention must be exceptional. Those detained must be charged and face trial with judicial guarantees, or released without delay.

Settlement activity continued during the reporting period. On 25 March, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that the illegal settlement outpost Migron, located on private Palestinian land, must be evacuated by the end of July, thus extending its own deadline for evacuation by four months and striking down an agreement reportedly reached between the Government and settlers to delay the evacuation by three years. Incidents of settler violence against Palestinians and their property resulted in 13 Palestinians injured, including one child. Demolition of Palestinian property left 158 people, including 38 children, homeless in East Jerusalem and Area C.

On 22 March, among other decisions, the Human Rights Council decided to dispatch a fact-finding mission to examine the impact of Israeli settlements on Palestinian human rights. Israel is highly critical of the Council's action.

On a positive note, I am pleased to inform the Council about the substantive progress achieved in the implementation of the mandate entrusted by the General Assembly to the United Nations Register of Damage caused by the Construction of the Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including in and around East Jerusalem. It has collected more than 26,000 claims for material damage caused by the construction of the barrier, which deviates from the Green Line. It has finished its work in four out of nine affected

governorates and has started its work in Salfit. That represents half of the estimated work. In that connection, in the light of the most recent visit to the occupied Palestinian territory by the Executive Director, we continue to urge that sustained donor support be provided to the work of the Register.

In Gaza, the most extensive escalation of violence since Operation Cast Lead took place from 9 to 13 March. The Quartet principals expressed concern and called for calm. The initial Israeli strike against the leader of the Popular Resistance Committees, who was allegedly involved in advanced planning for an attack against Israeli targets, resulted in a four-day exchange that resulted in 24 Palestinians being killed, including five civilians, and 71 Palestinians injured, including 55 civilians. A total of 11 Israeli civilians were injured, including one in critical condition. The Israeli Iron Dome anti-missile system was effective in intercepting military Grad missiles fired toward urban centres. Relative quiet was restored on 13 March through Egyptian mediation; President Abbas was also active in that regard. The calm remains tenuous and fragile, and we cannot stress enough the paramount importance of all efforts to maintain it.

Overall during the reporting period, a total of 211 rockets, including 80 Grad rockets, and 36 mortar shells were fired from Gaza into Israel, while the IDF conducted one incursion and 42 airstrikes into Gaza, resulting in four Palestinian civilians killed and 54 injured, while 20 Palestinian militants were killed and 15 injured. We have consistently condemned indiscriminate rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel. Such attacks are unacceptable and must stop. We also urge Israel to show maximum restraint. All sides must respect their obligations to protect civilians, who often pay the price of violence.

I am pleased to note Israel's approval of key United Nations projects in Gaza. The most recent approvals include two housing projects, consisting of just under 1,000 units, 10 schools, a road and four water infrastructure-related projects — all to be implemented by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. That brings the total value of approved United Nations works in the Gaza strip to more than $350 million. We will continue to work to address the manifold needs of the population of Gaza.

Our goal remains the lifting of the closure regime within the framework of resolution 1860 (2009). In that regard, the recent transfer of Gaza-produced date bars to the West Bank is a welcome step. An extension of the fishing limit will help to restore livelihood opportunities to some 3,000 families. We continue to call for the unrestricted import through legal crossings of aggregate, iron bar and cement, which will also benefit expanded construction of international community projects. In that effort, calm in Gaza and southern Israel is an indispensable condition to enable the proper environment for development.

Gaza also faces a fuel shortage that is beginning to extend beyond the rationing of electricity for households, which has been a feature over the past several years, to a situation where day-to-day life for Gazans is ever more dire. Hospitals and ambulance services are finding it increasingly difficult to function, and already water and sanitation systems are failing. All sides must take measures to resolve the supply problems through legitimate means in both the short and long term as soon as possible, and the de facto authorities in Gaza should assume their share of the responsibility in this regard.

There have been no major developments related to Palestinian reconciliation. We continue to support reconciliation efforts within the framework of the commitments of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the positions of the Quartet and the Arab Peace Initiative.

Turning to Lebanon, the Council heard a briefing last week on the situation from the United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon, Mr. Derek Plumbly. As was highlighted in that briefing, the situation along Lebanon's borders with Syria remains of concern. Around 900 refugees, fleeing fighting in the Syrian town of Al-Qusayr, arrived in Lebanon's Bekaa valley on 3 and 4 March. That was the largest influx of Syrian refugees since the crisis started over a year ago. The number of refugees in the Bekaa valley has reached approximately 5,000, while another 8,100 have registered with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Government in northern Lebanon.

Over the past week, tensions have increased in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ein el Hilweh following the escape to the camp of the alleged leader of a militant group that is accused by the Lebanese

Armed Forces of plotting attacks against it. The Lebanese Armed Forces have increased control measures around the camp and requested Palestinian factions to hand over the alleged leader.

The overall situation in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon area of operations has remained generally quiet. Air violations by the Israel Defense Forces have continued on an almost daily basis.

On 21 March, the Lebanese Cabinet adopted a decree on the establishment of a petroleum authority to manage the exploration and exploitation of Lebanon's potential hydrocarbon resources.

Let me now briefly say a few words on Syria, which remains the most pressing issue the United Nations has to address in the region. Violence on the ground has continued unabated, resulting in scores of people killed and injured. Credible estimates put the total death toll since the beginning of the uprising one year ago at more than 9,000. It is urgent to stop the fighting and prevent a further violent escalation of the conflict.

The Joint Special Envoy, who has recently briefed the Council, has continued his intensive diplomatic engagement to bring about a cessation of the violence and promote a peaceful political solution. He sent a mission to Damascus last week to pursue discussions on the six-point proposal he made to President Al-Assad on 11 March. The presidential statement (S/PRST/2012/6) adopted by the Council last week endorsed the six points and was an important signal, which the Secretary-General strongly welcomed.

We were informed this morning that the Syrian Government has now written to the Joint Special Envoy, Kofi Annan, accepting his six-point plan. Mr. Annan has written to President Al-Assad urging the Syrian Government to put its commitments into immediate effect. Mr. Annan has stressed that implementation will be key, not only for the Syrian people, who are caught in the middle of this tragedy, but also for the region and the international community as a whole. The support of all key regional and international actors is critical to help secure the effective implementation of the plan at all levels and create the conditions for a genuine political process that will meet the democratic aspirations of the Syrian people.

The Joint Envoy visited Moscow, where he met with Russian President Medvedev and Foreign Minister Lavrov on Sunday. He is now in Beijing for consultations with the Chinese authorities. The Secretary-General is going to the League of Arab States summit in Baghdad with Deputy Joint Special Envoy Nasser Al-Kidwa, who will also participate in the Friends of Syria meeting in Istanbul on 1 April.

Immediate steps are now needed on the part of the Syrian Government to act on its commitments and demonstrate to the Syrian people that it is ready for a cessation of violence and a political process, issues on which the Joint Special Envoy will also engage the opposition.

It is vital to ensure humanitarian access and that assistance reaches those in need. The Syrian authorities invited United Nations agencies and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to participate in a Government-led humanitarian assessment from 18 to 26 March, which visited a number of governorates. That Government-led assessment falls short of the United Nations request for unimpeded access for humanitarian organizations. However, the participation of the United Nations at a technical level has allowed for the gathering of critical information, which confirms that there is a significant need for medical and food assistance, as well as for education and non-food items. We are ready to provide emergency aid immediately, and the Humanitarian Coordinator is in discussions with the Syrian authorities to ensure prompt and sustained delivery.

Turning back to the Middle East peace process, let me conclude by emphasizing the increased risks of a continued political vacuum. As I said to the AHLC last week, it will become increasingly difficult to sustain the achievements of Palestinian State-building without a political horizon, and the absence of progress can easily be filled by negative trends that make each day more uncertain.

It is this uncertain situation that the Quartet will have to address at its meeting on 11 April in Washington. It is imperative that the Quartet assume its responsibilities in directing collective efforts towards overcoming gaps in trust and substance, so that we do not lose sight of the ultimate and agreed goal of a two-State solution.

The President: I now invite Council members to informal restricted consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.25 a.m.